

The LORD Leads the Blind

Isaiah 42:14-21 (NIV)

¹⁴ "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant. ¹⁵ I will lay waste the mountains and hills and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn rivers into islands and dry up the pools. ¹⁶ I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them. ¹⁷ But those who trust in idols, who say to images, 'You are our gods,' will be turned back in utter shame. ¹⁸ "Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! ¹⁹ Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one in covenant with me, blind like the servant of the LORD? ²⁰ You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen." ²¹ It pleased the LORD for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious.

Pin the tail on the donkey is still a thing, right? You know, where you blindfold someone, spin them around a few times to get them good and disoriented, and then laugh as they awkwardly stumble in some direction to maybe, hopefully, pin the tail on the picture of a donkey. It's an amusing party game.

But what about being actually blind? Part of me hopes that if I were to lose my sight that I would be like Daredevil, that the loss of one of my five senses would result in superhuman, superhero levels in my other senses, particularly sound. While other senses might be heightened, being blind would bring about a whole new world of living – having to learn braille, using a walking stick, listening for the crosswalks to tell me when it is safe to cross the street, having to prepare meals all by touch. But then take away the sense of hearing. Then you would lose all auditory cues to follow. You couldn't hear a voice warning you that you are about to trip over something or if a car is coming. Being blind and deaf, the world would get very dark, very insulated, and scary.

I guess I should thank God that I'm not blind or deaf. Or am I?

I may not be physically blind or deaf, but over this past week, I have felt a bit of both. I feel blind in that I do not know what's going to happen day to day, hour to hour. I went from 10 days ago thinking that we should probably just tell people we are aware of the coronavirus concerns to telling people the active measures we were taking to calm concerns over gathering for worship to recognizing that out of concern and the wellbeing of others we should suspend all our gatherings at church. Now, I'm preaching to an empty church building - minus my wife and boys. Thankfully, through God's gift of technology, I'm not just going through the motions of preaching a sermon to three people, but also to all of you watching and worshiping with us wherever you are right now. But I don't know when I will get to gather with all of you again. I don't know how many more people will be infected with COVID-19 in Utah with the current number being over 100 and climbing. I don't know if I will get it or be a carrier and give it to someone else. I don't know if we will be forced to remain in our homes, only being allowed out for essentials such as groceries and prescription pickups and doctor appointments. I feel deaf not hearing all the information, not knowing the whole situation. I kind of just want to know when I will be able to eat at my favorite Chinese buffet again, but I can't see the future. There's a lot I don't know. I feel blind.

Saying that out loud in the midst of everything going makes me realize I have been relying on my own powers of observation as my ultimate guide. How many times how I assumed that I know what is going to happen, what the future is? How many times have I felt that I have heard all the information, that I am well-informed? Do I really think that I am God, that I know everything that's going on at all times, what people are thinking, what's happening all over the world, what viruses will and will not spread, what will and will not be detrimental to my health and the health of others? I trust what I see and what I hear because then I feel in control of the information. I rely on me to get me through all of this. And when what I can do cannot change my situation or the world around me, then I feel powerless and helpless. I was blind to the fact that I was thinking of myself as God, that I was the one in control. In these days it has brought to light once again the simple truth that I am not God. I am in the dark. I am blind.

The Israelites in Isaiah's day were about to have that same realization. For hundreds, even thousands of years, God's people had put their trust in God's promise that he would send a Deliverer, a mighty King who would rule over all nations. They had had the rule of the warrior King of David, but he died and left them. After the days of King Solomon, son of David, the nation of Israel had been in decline. They were waiting for days to come that would be more glorious than the days of David's victories and Solomon's wisdom and splendor.

But the LORD said, "I will lay waste the mountains and hills and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn rivers into islands and dry up the pools." (verse 15) Woah. God, you're going to destroy our beautiful and majestic mountains? You are going to dry up our

vegetation? You're going to bring a famine on us, take away our food? You're going to dry up the rivers and pools, taking away our water supply? (And who of us did not have these same of these thoughts cross our minds as we went grocery shopping this week?) God, what are you doing here? Are you punishing us? Are you plunging us into darkness? The Israelites were about to realize again that they were not in control of their situation. They had been blind to their self-reliance and entitlement.

Was God punishing them? It certainly sounds like it...until you listen to the next verse: "I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them." (verse 16) God leveled the mountains and hills not in anger but to make a smooth path for us. He dried up the vegetation not to starve us but so that it wouldn't impede us. He dried up the pools and rivers of water not to force dehydration on us but so that we could pass on dry ground. God removed all our obstacles, anything that would hinder or trip up someone who is blind and deaf.

The LORD did all these things in order to lead blind people by ways we have not known. He exposed our sin, and, in doing so, he removed our blindness to our sins of idolatry and self-reliance. He completely changed us. As Paul wrote in our second Bible reading, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." (Ephesians 5:8) He removed all obstacles that would trip us up as he guides us on his path, a path we never would have seen on our own, his path of righteousness. We think that we have to do it, we have to travel it by ourselves, we have to make our own way. But God removed our blindness caused by our self-reliance. He showed us his way. He takes care of us. He does it all for us. It is his blood shed for us to pay for our sins and his righteousness lived for us that covers us and makes us right with God. He guides us to rely completely on him instead of ourselves so that we are brought to safety.

We are in unfamiliar territory and paths right now. We are like the blindfolded kid playing pin the tail on the donkey – disorientated, unable to see the path, having no idea really where to go. We might as well be blind because we don't know so many things right now. During times such as these, though, we have a God who is guiding us by the hand. He is removing our darkness with his Light so that we see where we are going. He shows us himself as the Light of the world. He shows us that he has the power to remove blindness and deafness. The man in our Gospel reading today was born blind. He had never seen light before. But Jesus removed his blindness so that he could see his Savior – removing both his physical and his spiritual blindness. And you know that he was not the only one that Jesus did this for. As Jesus told John the Baptist's disciples who were wondering if Jesus was the one to come, he said: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight ... the deaf hear ... Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." (Matthew 11:4,5,6)

God takes away our spiritual blindness, our spiritual darkness. Sometimes he does this by taking away our self-reliance, like we are experiencing right now. He does this to remove our obstacles that would cause us to stumble and hinder us from being with him. He removes these obstacles and gives us sight so that we are saved by him. Any time that we feel blind, we can know at the same time that God is guiding us through ways we have not known, guiding us along unfamiliar paths, his paths of his righteousness given to us. And he will never let go of your hand. He's not going to play pin the tail on the donkey with you, keeping you blind, spinning you around, and then laughing as you try to stumble through the darkness of life. No. He brings us light. He never leaves our side. He never leaves us to walk his righteous paths alone. He will not forsake us or turn his back on us, especially in dark and unfamiliar times such as these.

God, lead us. Remove all obstacles that would keep us from you. Remove all our sins, all our darkness, by your Son, Jesus Christ. He is the Light of the world. He is our Light that removes our spiritual blindness and darkness. Continue to hold our hands through these times as you promised. Amen.